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Art as a Catalyst for Landscape Democracy

L'arte come catalizzatore per la Democrazia del Paesaggio

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Parole chiave: PAESAGGIO, DEMOCRAZIA, INSTALLAZIONE D'ARTE, PROGETTAZIONE PARTECIPATIVA, SPAZIO PUBBLICO

The project promoted utilizing democratic ideals in the process of planning public space in the Nord-Holland district of Kassel, Germany. A public workshop, social gathering and temporary public art installation were the vehicles for empowering marginalized groups and unifying a highly diverse and fragmented community. The emotional map output from the community workshop was the basis for a candle light installation that bisected the neighborhood, engaging the general public on issues that both destabilized and strengthened the community. The engagement of landscape challenges through a site specific art installation offered stakeholders palpable interaction with abstract issues. A cross-disciplinary approach to spatial planning can deepen stakeholder engagement in the just, transparent and inclusive processes of participatory design.

Il progetto ha promosso l'uso di ideali democratici nel processo di pianificazione dello spazio pubblico nel quartiere Nord-Holland di Kassel, in Germania. Un seminario pubblico, una raccolta sociale e un'installazione temporanea di arte pubblica sono stati gli strumenti per dare potere ai gruppi emarginati e per riunire una comunità estremamente diversificata e frammentata. Il risultato emotivo del seminario comunitario è stata la base di un'installazione a lume di candela che ha scosso il quartiere, coinvolgendo il pubblico su questioni che hanno destabilizzato e rafforzato la comunità. L'impegno delle sfide del paesaggio attraverso un'installazione artistica specifica per un sito ha offerto ai soggetti interessati un'interazione accettabile con questioni astratte. Un approccio interdisciplinare alla pianificazione territoriale può rafforzare l'impegno delle parti interessate nei processi giusti, trasparenti e inclusivi di progettazione partecipativa.



INTRODUCTION

This project ultimately originated from ideas expressed in the 2016 Landscape Education for Democracy online seminar relating to the 2000 European Landscape Convention, which called for changes in state policy and processes in order to directly engage stakeholders in the design process (Zingonia: Partnering for Landscape Democracy, IP booklet, https://ledwiki.hfwu.de/index.php?title=LED_Workshop_Zingonia_2016). The emphasis on educating future planners and designers on approaching communities in a democratic manner in order to inform public planning ultimately overlapped with many of the ideals seen in public art installation and design intervention projects. Upon further research, a series of projects were presented at the 2016 LED intensive project in Zingonia, Italy. Each of these projects were critiqued on their ability to fulfill key elements of successful participatory design, citing the need for - Recognizing sacred spaces, Utilizing local knowledge, Uniting community,

Empowering marginalized groups, Appropriating resources, Identifying historic landmarks, Building shared experiences and Fostering empathy (Hester 2006).

Leading up to the 2017 LED intensive project scheduled for summer in Kassel, Germany, the idea of utilizing such a project was discussed. Considering the unique variables inherent to Nord-Holland, the project needed - to promote democratic values regarding planning issues, to empower voices regardless of language barriers, to activate minority stakeholders, to show cultural sensitivity and promote engagement with LED students while concurrently acting as a gift to the community. Over the 6 months leading up to the date of the summer intensive program, multiple visits to the Nord-Holland district revealed a multi-stage project that could address the above mentioned needs. The project would include a workshop to engage with a cross-section of children from the district, collaborating on a neighborhood mapping activity and an

output of objects to mark the landscape in the last stage of the project. The second and third stages occurred consecutively on the same evening entailing a community picnic followed by a night walk through a public art installation. The staging of the project was designed to engage with some of the marginalized groups in the community, building trust and project awareness over multiple meetings. Contact would be initially made through neighborhood institutions, and allow time to build off their network with individuals stakeholders in the community, progressing in the following manner - Institution - Family - Extended Network - General Public. In this regard, by the time the 3rd stage had begun, the impact of this accrued network's presence interacting with the installation would encourage the general public to follow suit. Each stage presented students from the LED intensive the unique opportunity to engage a range of stakeholders on landscape issues, in a variety of environments and a conducive atmosphere for natural conversation.

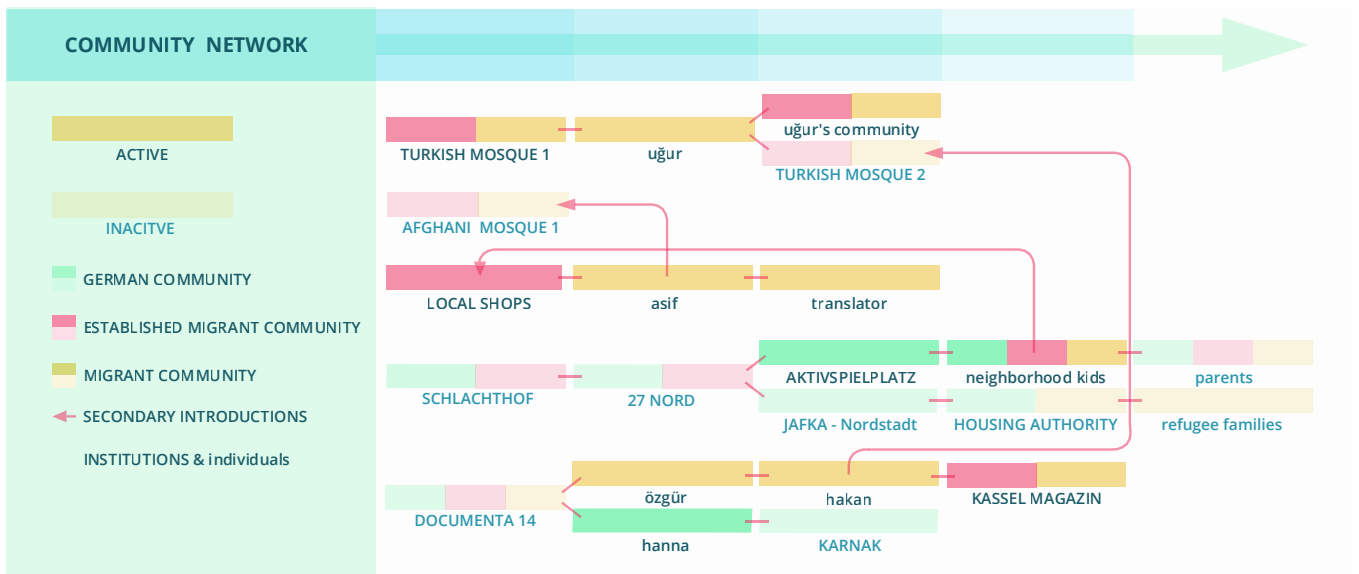


1. LOCATION

Kassel is a centrally located German city on the Fulda river. Having developed a strong industrial identity during the 19th century, it played a key role in Germany's military industry leading up to the first and second World Wars. The north side of the city housed Germany's largest railway locomotive manufacturer, which adapted its production to develop tanks and armored vehicles in the 20th century. Home to the Henschel factory, the Nordstadt, became synonymous with the military industry from that point forward. Along with the success of this industry came the development of the Nord-Holland neighborhood. The initial developments in this region included the laying of a rail line, along with the channeling of the Ahna river, a tributary of the Fulda, allowing suppliers of Henschel to setup an industrial zone between Hollandische strasse and the Ahna. With the growth of industry, housing districts in the small valley began to crop up,



followed by the establishment of the local slaughterhouse (www.kassel.de/stadt/stadtteile/nordholland). However, the neighborhood suffered regression after the war, with many businesses relocating or closing by 1970. These changes coincided with the state run guest worker program, Gastarbeiter, which facilitated an influx of immigrant labor throughout the country, between 1950 and 1970. This was the first group of migrants to strongly influence the Nord-Holland demographic. By the 1980's Kassel University had begun to repurpose some of the former industrial spaces in the Nordstadt, eventually expanding to the point of butting up against the edge of the NordHolland along the border with Nordstadt Park. At this edge of the current university campus, the Slachthof (a former slaughterhouse), was appropriated in 1981 through a citizens initiative and formed into a cultural center for the Nordstadt. The site of this project focuses on the major landscape piece which bisects the Nord-Holland district, the Ahna river. This channeled body of water flows to the city center parallel the main traffic corridor from the north, Hollandische strasse. These two physical barriers greatly impact the landscape and stakeholders in the district. Additionally, the mix of commercial, industrial and dense residential zones between them contain a number of key spaces for the 16,000 inhabitants in the 3.5km² that make up the Nord-Holland district. (Kulbarsch, Ulrike; Marsen, Holger; Soltau, Peter. District History as Urban History. Kassel. Self Published)



2. RESIDENTS

The Nord-Holland community was established in the 1920's, when housing was organized for factory workers in the area. Since then, the Nord-Holland has experienced significant changes to its demographic - the influx of workers in the Gastarbeiter program influenced the first shift, next the student population from the 1980's onward significantly affected the age of the populace, followed by a more recent flow of refugees and economic migrants. The immigrant community making up the Gastarbeiter program consisted of southern European and north African immigrants. However, the largest group to live and settle in Germany, were Turkish. This community has established itself in the Nordstadt, running successful businesses and institutions. The Turkish community includes 2nd and 3rd generation immigrants, as well as new arrivals, making them the largest immigrant community in Nord-Holland. Many recent immigrants settling in Nord-Holland hail from Afghanistan, Syria, Somalia and EU member states, such as Bulgaria and Romania. Those displaced due to

conflict can suffer emotional distress connected to their displacement. Many expressed frustration and dissatisfaction with their current environment, citing - poor opportunities for developing their professions, challenges with language and cultural barriers, inadequate living conditions and an unfavorable climate. A resourceful and resilient population of youth has grown from both waves of immigrants. Kids are often the first in their family to master a language skill or integrate with the resident community. This can be seen on the basketball court, the soccer pitch and in the local boxing gym, where a cross-section of first, second and third generation migrants train with their German peers. One of the most influential populations of the Nord-Holland is a transient group of students attending the university. More than 25,000 students attend University of Kassel, with over 3,000 of them from abroad (<http://www.uni-kassel.de/uni/universitaet/ueber-uns/zahlen-und-fakten.html>). Considering the rate at which students relocate, change residences, or their disproportionate

priorities in comparison to other residents, this population likely has a destabilizing effect on the neighborhood. A number of local institutions have played a key role integrating this unique demographic makeup, trying to overcome the challenge of developing consensus, communication and empathy, between them. The project pursued many of these institutions, along with local businesses, in trying to tap into and uncover the connections and divisions in the Nord-Holland network. However, individual relationships with stakeholders played the largest role revealing the depth of the community network and its interconnectedness. (Awojobi, O.N., The Economic Impact of Immigration on Kassel, Germany: An Observation, www.researchgate.net/publication/).

3. WORKSHOP

The workshop stage of the project played multiple roles - engaging a cross-section of the community, introducing subsequent stages, building trust, and gathering feedback. Past projects with difficult to reach communities have proven that building relationships with children opens communication with parents. Two Nord-Holland youth centers, Nord27 and Aktivspielplatz Quellhofstrasse were potential partners. ASP Quellhofstrasse proved to be the better fit for the project workshop. Local children, 13 years and younger, from Turkish, Syrian, Bulgarian, Polish and German families attend ASP activities throughout the week. The organization was open to a workshop involving participatory mapping activities and crafts, but had reservations about language barriers between attendees and workshop leaders. However, establishing familiarity over a series of meetings typically diminishes communication issues. Before the mapping project workshop, an introductory meeting was arranged, where project leaders had the chance to interact with ASP children in their environment at their own pace. Additionally, a Turkish translator attended the mapping workshop. Days before the workshop, the activities were added to the ASP itinerary and children were informed. ASP attendance is inconsistent, yet there was a turnout of approximately 20 children. Due to the fact that participation at ASP is optional, it was necessary for workshop activities to draw and hold the attention of attendees. The first workshop task, a chalk map of the NordHolland district centered on the Ahna river, was mapped onto an outdoor basketball court. The finished map was 25m long and included streets, homes, schools and frequented landmarks. The large scale was key for allowing up to 10 participants to collaboratively draw the map and later to actively explore routes between businesses, homes and institutions. When passing through

the imaginary landscape, children were directed to mark spaces where they felt good or bad, while verbalizing those emotions and experiences. Participants were asked to build a consensus, ranking these locations and designating positive or negative. The second half of the workshop invited participants to create images that represent the landmarks they mapped, drawing that image on a white parchment bag. The bags were categorized as either positive or negative, and collected for the third stage of the project, where they would be used with tea candles to act as lanterns in the public art installation.





4. PICNIC

Nordstadt Park was the location for the second stage of the project. This neighborhood gem sits along the Ahna river at the south end of the neighborhood butting up against the University of Kassel. Aside from leisure activities, it has also been used as a gathering space for local groups to present social issues, invite dialogue and build consensus and awareness pertaining to their cause. Frequenting by each demographic of Nord-Holland, it was an ideal place for a community picnic. A community gathering allows for both passerby and attendees to visualize the diversity of culture present in the landscape and integrate through shared leisure. It also acted as a starting point for the introduction of conversation on local landscape issues in a relaxed atmosphere conducive to open discussion between neighborhood communities and LED students attending the intensive workshop. With the need for cultural sensitivity in such an environment, it was important to be aware of cultural and religious concerns regarding diet and consumption. To address this, we sought partnership with a number of community mosques. In the end, Ugur,

a representative of a Turkish mosque aided the project in formulating a menu, as well as, leading a trip to a local Turkish market to buy food and supplies. On the evening of the picnic, members of both the mosque and Ugur's community attended the event and orchestrated setting up the picnic. The community picnic was an open event intended for all neighborhood stakeholders, advertised in coordination with the two partner organizations and local businesses. Flyers were placed in community housing and refuge designated accommodation as well. In particular, one of the landmarks designated in the student mapping projects was a local shop located a few meters from the 3rd stage installation



location. This shop agreed to support the project by distributing bags with the project motif to their clients, on the day of the installation. The shop owner acted as an ambassador for the picnic and installation by informing customers of project details and inviting their participation. Gathering for the picnic began in the evening and finished as dusk fell while organizers completed the public installation, setting the stage for the community night walk.



5. INSTALLATION

The last stage of the project was set in the 1.8km greenway that runs North to South through the Nord-Holland district, against the West bank of the Ahna river channel. This centrally located tract of land runs through commercial, industrial and residential zones, beginning in NordHolland Park and passing by a Turkish mosque and the Afghani cultural center, two sacred spaces noted by stakeholders. Flanked by schools, markets, housing estates and other cultural institutions, as well as, the bottleneck that bridges over the Ahna create, this path is crossed by much of the populace. More importantly, this space contains a majority of the negative landmarks mapped by children in their workshop. Here it is possible to witness excessive public drinking, drug abuse and distribution, impromptu homeless shelters and the sites of pedestrian-vehicle casualties. This poorly lit space has harbored a number

of community landscape issues both day and night. The total area of green space afforded by this site is more than double that of the neighborhood's largest park, yet many in the community see it as a burden rather than a resource. This 3rd stage aimed to fulfill the need for democratic processes which explore the landscape while offering LED students the opportunity to interact with community at specific sites that reflect local landscape issues. An interactive art installation in the public sphere, running the entire length of the greenway, was created to provide that opportunity. The installation utilized nearly 1,000 white paper candle lanterns emblazoned with two designs and placed every couple of meters. The front of the bag displayed a colorful living tree, the back a dark dead tree with no leaves, each containing a tea candle which sets the images aglow along the dim path.

Amongst the thousand lanterns, the 12 landmark lanterns from the children's workshop were placed corresponding with the landscape issue they represented. The entire 1.8km installation was a linear depiction of the children's neighborhood map, site-specific, represented in light. As observers moved along this path they were encouraged to vote on the landscape before them by turning a corresponding lantern face to reveal the dead or living tree. This democratic gesture afforded LED students the chance to observe public reactions to the landscape, while opening up an opportunity for timely conversation in relation to specific landscape issues in the district. Public engagement ranged from observation, voting and engaging in dialogue with the students, to even placing their own candles in the lanterns.

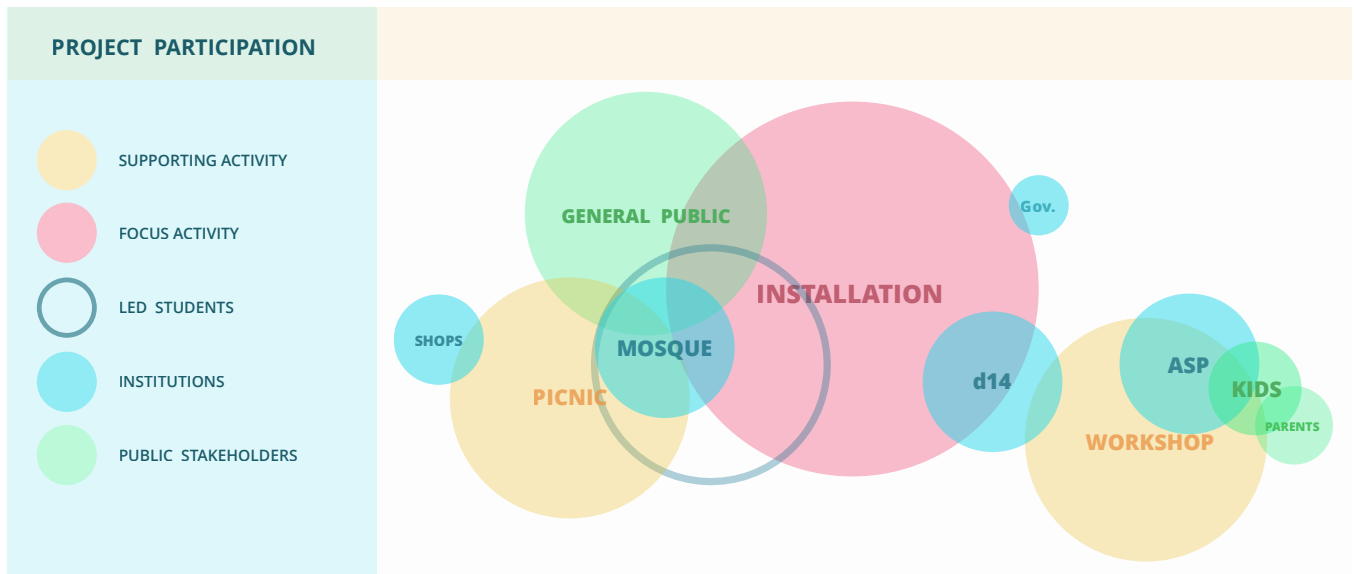


6. PARTICIPATION

One of the project aims was to pursue groups that would likely have had a limited voice, or represent a minority population among stakeholders. These groups included the 2nd and 3rd generation immigrant community, the newly arrived immigrant and refugee communities and lastly children from the resident German community and groups mentioned above. To make initial contact with these communities, institutions were utilized as access points for developing individual relationships with stakeholders. Additionally, the resources available to the institutions became potential resources for supporting this project. In regards to the children who interacted with the project, they engaged deeply with concepts and activities, as expected. Surprisingly, corresponding engagement with parents never fully developed, and was limited to just a few chance opportunities at the youth center. Later feedback from ASP revealed that parents were never contacted about

events in the 2nd and 3rd stages of the project, due to time constraints. However, ASP's partnership allowed irreplaceable access to a key community and was paramount to the success of the project. Future projects will need to explore methods for disseminating project information through partnership networks in a simple and effective manner, not wholly reliant on the children. Accessing the established immigrant community's 2nd and 3rd generations, as well as the new immigrant community proved successful via both the youth center and the Turkish mosque. The relationship with the Turkish mosque resulted in individual and institutional participation from an adult community, who engaged in the final two stages of the project, proving to be a very effective partner. Additionally, their selection of menu items for the picnic and the accompanying shopping trip to a local Turkish business delivered another potential partnership.

Unfortunately, timing did not allow for a relationship with the Turkish market to be pursued. However, the other local shops that did engage in advertising the project were interested in the project concept, and likely would have been open to a deeper level of cooperation. The general public showed interest in each stage of the project, workshop, picnic and installation. Activating public space has this affect. In fact, setup of the community picnic was aided by a local Turkish family that were drawn in by the activated space. Additionally, from the moment of installation set up to its deconstruction, roughly 7 hours, the public engaged with volunteers from the documenta14 community, LED students and the partially finished installation. Aside from their indirect relationship to the d14 volunteers, the municipality's only role was in permitting the use of public space.





7. REFLECTION

Both temporary and permanent public art installations foment cultural ideals in community space. From monuments to graffiti tagged walls, the opportunity for public engagement regardless of sanctioning, abounds.

Tapping in to this resource and partnering with artists/ designers could greatly expand the reach of community participatory design processes and greatly advance the ideals of landscape democracy. Leveraging these projects helps promote awareness of LED project aims through presence in the public realm, visualizing responses to landmark issues to support consensus building, empowering stakeholders whose perspective have been minimized, and symbolically reinforces key cultural/historical neighborhood identities or can help in establishing new ones.

Apart from the above intangible qualities, site specific art installations offer a palpable interaction with the landscape, giving context to abstract mapping practices that can be difficult for community to relate to.

However, to benefit from prospective tools, planners need access to artists with a distinct awareness of project aims and practices that promote democratic ideals. Although, selecting a local artist to partner with may be appealing, familiarity with the locality may not always prove to be advantageous.



Stakeholders often carry bias. However, artists working in public space could provide the ideal partnership, as previous experience prepares them for unexpected and challenging variables inherit working in the public sphere. Critical to the artist's experience is a familiarity with projects that address social issues and encourage participation, as relationship building is the crux of each project. This project achieved a framework and process that proved effective on many fronts, but ultimately was not fully utilized due to the demanding nature of the intensive LED workshop students participated in.

Each step in the execution of this project built upon a narrative made up of characters from the Nord-Holland community, lasting until the very last lantern went dark. To reap the benefits of this tool, designers must fully engage these projects and play an active role throughout. A partnership

between planner and artist, a role that simultaneously acts and observes. Unfortunately, this active role was filled by volunteers from the documenta 14 community, who had no further use for the access they were given to the community. This project was a satellite of a larger educational endeavor aimed at exposing future landscape planners to the role landscape democracy and participatory planning can play in their practice.

Output from LED seminar final presentations proved that observation of and engagement with this project increased the likelihood of participants partnering with artists/designer in the future.

Cross-disciplinary approaches to participatory planning can deepen stakeholder engagement in a just, transparent and inclusive process.



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